

## **State Solutions**

### **The Sportsmen's Perspective**

Since 2000, Colorado has experienced 29 devastating wildfires. These fires have taken hundreds of millions of dollars to fight and have devastated wildlife habitats, as well as, private property. The loss cannot just be measured by the number of insurance claims, but also need to include the cost of habitat restoration.

A prime example is the Trinidad Complex Fires in 2002. The James John / Lake Dorothey State wildlife Area was destroyed by the James John fire. Prior to that fire, Hundreds of Thousands of Sportsmen's dollars were spent on habitat restoration and treatments within the Wildlife Area. The habitat treatments created a tremendous hunting area for elk, deer, turkey, and great fishing for rainbow and cutthroat trout. This entire vital habitat was destroyed. How do you put a price on that loss and to whom do you turn in your claim to? For the most part large prey and predator species are able to escape. But small game and nesting birds are hit the hardest in the short term.

Fish losses are another story. When grasses and forbs, which hold runoff to a minimum are burned away erosion from heavy thunderstorms and Monsoons Rains wash ash, debris, sediments and retardants into streams. Consequently, fish gills become clogged and they die. Seventy percent of the fish were lost in the South Plate River due to the 2002 Hayman Fire. Even with the restocking efforts, it took years to reestablish that natural reproduction. And again to whom do we turn in an insurance claim? As always, it is put on the back of the Sportsmen to pay for the damage.

A major factor in the decline of Sage Grouse and Mule Deer is the loss of vital habitats. Over the past six decades, the encroachment of Gambel Oak and Pinyon / Juniper has drastically diminished the critical Mule Deer winter ranges and has created barriers that have virtually closed some big game migration corridors. These woody plants have infringed on Grouse Leks creating, if you will, tree stands from which Birds of Prey attack mating grouse.

Controlled Burns are an implement in the toolbox of habitat restoration that is underutilized. It is the preferred method of the BLM and Forest Service, but it's extremely difficult to get them done, especially with the current apprehension about starting any fires. And when there are adjoining ranches it is even harder to get done. Controlled Burns work well for big game habitat restoration because fire recycles the nutrients much faster than decomposition. But again fire can be disastrous to small game and nesting birds.

Timing restrictions and air quality restrictions are what kill most controlled burns in Western Colorado. If Utah is using control burns in the Bookcliffs then we are shut down because the prevailing winds reduce the air quality in western Colorado

and shut down any scheduled burn. The windows of opportunity are small and if there is a major wildfire burning in Colorado then the controlled burn is a No-Go.

That leaves us with mechanical manipulations. Mechanical does cost more than controlled burns, but in many ways it is safer and you can pre-determine your outcome. There is no total destruction of the forbes and grasses, which may take up to two or three years to establish. This makes the mechanical treatment a favorable alternative to fire. Most treatments are done in a mosaic pattern, leaving bedding cover for protection during harsh weather. Reseeding of the treatment areas is done by a range seeder or by broadcasting.

Restrictions on mechanical manipulations are mostly Interior Agency policies. For instance, The BLM will allow mechanical manipulations but only with rubber tire equipment. The CMDA was successful in getting rubber-tracked equipment approved on the BLM lands in 2011. In some areas the Forest Service has a non-motorized policy. This curtails any mechanical manipulation for habitat restoration. On one side of the fence you are doing great improvements for Mule Deer Habitat but on the other side the work is stopped. No motorized equipment can be used. This seems to be somewhat of a paradox. We can only improve habitat up to the fence line, so animals still can't reach their summer feed grounds and our effort has a very limited outcome. Yet the CMDA was asked by the Forest Service to cut fire-brakes on Forestlands in preparation for a controlled burn and we did this with a track hoe.

Doing mechanical manipulations on the forest seems a no-brainer. You create the needed habitat improvements and while working one could easily cut fire brakes to reduce wildfire expansion. Permits are issued to cut timber on the forest and mechanical means are used to extract the logs, so why not for habitat improvements. The major negative about mechanical manipulation is the cost. It is much more costly than a controlled burn.

#### Restructure Priorities:

Our Nation gives billions of Tax Payers Dollars to foreign countries to build infrastructures, roads, power plants, schools, the list goes on and on. And the Agencies that are charged with managing our public lands continue to get budget cuts. The BLM asks us, the CMDA, to pay for manipulations and seed for their projects. The only habitat funding the CMDA gets comes from Auction and Raffle Account Grants and some HPP Grants. With the reduction in drilling permits in western Colorado there is very little Oil & Gas mitigation going on and grants from the Industry to do their mitigation work have ceased. We hear Congress speaking about creating jobs. If congress would re-prioritize some of the billions that get sent over seas and funnel those funds to the States for habitat protection, we could not only improve habitats and also create jobs. We'll cut fire-brakes and clean up our forest. But there needs to be some collaboration on Interior Agency Policies, some

shifting of funds and avenues within the Interior Department to issue grants to NGO's who diligently work at improving wildlife habitats.

I respectfully encourage this Caucus to affirm a commitment for the implementation of these needed changes and to establish revenue streams for habitat protection and restoration. If Sportsmen Organizations can obtain the grants, we will revitalize our forest, reduce wildfire damages and improve Wildlife Habitats. We still are the Nation's best Conservationist.

Thank you all for the opportunity to testify before you today.

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